Spell Improvisation

All spells were invented by someone, so why not by your characters?

- If a character has the Magical Training skill leveled at least once, they can cast improvised spells. In combat, this takes full-round action and can't be used defensively. In situations of high pressure (because of combat or other circumstances), this check is conducted with a -2 penalty. In laboratory conditions during long research, I would give from +1-5 on this check, depending on the available equipment.
- When improvising a spell, the character must make a check of Magical Training against the DC set by the rank of the spell and its effects. Failed Magical Training checks produce inefficient results, increasing STA cost of the spell by each missing point, bloating the cost to potentially suicidal overdraw. The player then notes this spell in his sheet as if they learned it. The resulting spell can't be re-improvised until sufficient time has passed (for a quick combat spell ~1 day, for lab-researched one - once per downtime) - I would also extend this prohibition on all thematically similar spells, but not if the player thinks about some clever way to achieve the same result by different means.
- The spell may be cast in the same action as it was improvised (using Spell Casting as usual, comparing with defences if needed or just checking for fumbles) or forfeited - if the caster thinks that they can't afford it. In the latter case, the action is still spent.
- A character can recast his improvised spell any number of times they want. If they re-improvise the spell and get a worse result, they can take the previous one - sometimes new ideas are not better. They can also learn their improvised spell like any other - by spending the IP on them, they can reduce the casting time to action, use the spell defensively and potentially even increase efficiency (depending on how good they roll their learning checks).
- I suggest reducing the IP needed for learning Novice spells to 5 and Journeyman to 15.

Novice, Journeyman, Master distinction

RAW distinction between ranks lies in rough game developer vibes about general power-level of the spell. I prefer a more clear-cut separation that allows both GM and player to know the general limits of character's power. You'll see that it is pretty much Mage the Awakening, because I think it is rather intuitive even in a world with different natural laws.

Novice spells

STA cost 3, MT DC 12, +1 STA cost per unmet MT point.
Novice spells allow one to create an effect in the range of plausible: the fire flares up or dies down, the wind picks up or stills, fog is created in a wet environment, lightning falls from dark and heavy clouds onto a lone person on the hill, a person recovers from a disease easily. Also

creation of sensory and information-gathering effects in the immediate vicinity - to know where the north is, to know what this person is thinking right now, to know whether any magical aura is present, to know when the lies are spoken.

Novice spells are generally not good in direct conflict - the mage would need to carefully manipulate their environment for any kind of damage, but giving an enemy more slippery boots on the mud or having a half-second warning about the arrow shot their way may be a deciding factor. They are king of utility, though - easy to improvise, cheap to cast, hard to trace.
Of course, a clever mage can bury someone in an unstable cave, force a person to slip on the edge of the precipice, lure a dangerous predator or induce a heart-attack on someone already quite unhealthy - but this requires planning and cunning.

Journeyman spells

STA cost 9, MT DC 17, +2 STA cost per unmet MT point.
Journeyman spells allow one to create an effect in the range of possible: the fire erupts from nothing, objects fly by themself, person suddenly has wounds from nothing - or the wounds disappear to nothing, the object suddenly is frozen over, the fog appears on a hot and dry day, the winds blow indoors, the lightning falls from the clear sky onto a specific person in a crowd, the feelings arise or die in the heart of a person, the thought festers in their brain, the stone shapes itself into a new form, a disease is purged.

Each of those things are the thing that can be: can this thing burn? then you can create the fire; can this thing be in flight for just a moment? then it can be afloat for as long as you maintain the spell.
Once the spell's effects are ended, the laws of the world start affecting the subject one more, but if the new configuration is stable - like the healed person or the reshaped stone - they will remain like this.

Those are the spells that would see the most use in-combat, they are flashy and capable of reshaping the battlefield. Those are also the spells you are most likely to cast, if you need a problem to be solved immediately.
Most spells in the rulebook would be reclassified as journeyman, as they are about raw elemental manipulation - even master spells are just more of the same.

Master spells

STA cost 24, MT DC 22, +3 STA cost per unmet MT point.
Master spells allow one to create *any* effect, no matter how impossible: human is now an animal or an object, two points in space collapse into one, fire burns memories instead of flesh, identity rewritten, material transmuted. This is also a realm of monster creation - to mutate two animals into a hybrid, or to create a mind ex-nihilo for a golem (or with a fleshy body - for a homunculus) would require a master spell.

Master spells are about changing the inherent nature of things. They are capable of full transformations, including esoteric and weird ones (what does it mean to remove the concept of left from the volume of space? what does it mean to transform sunlight into pink elephant's blossoms?) Be ready to prohibit the spell, if the player can't articulate how the spell will manifest and what it would actually do. But if the transformation is relatively simple and the end result is stable inside the world's natural laws (lead into gold, human into witcher), it will last infinitely, until someone transforms the subject back (or finds some weird conceptual loophole as often the case with curses).

Improvising master spells mid-combat is generally not advisable - they are hard to quickly conceptualize and most of the time you'll end up with something completely unusable. However, those are the spells that give elite mages their leverage, the ability to reshape the world completely, even on a small scale and for a little time.

What spellcasting can't do

Magic by itself is notoriously bad at creating permanent effects. The results of the spell are either instantaneous, require active maintenance (via Active cost) or short-lasting (with random but fixed duration). Spells that are marked as "until shaken off" are effectively instantaneous - the recovery isn't.
But the consequences of the spell may be lasting, if they are stable without magic - no known applied force can turn lead into gold, but the gold is real, stable and won't turn back - if that wasn't an illusion, of course.

Ritual spells

RAW, rituals and spells are two different systems that barely intersect. I think this is wrong and ritual casting should extend the regular one naturally:
The ritual casting allows mages to cast prohibitively expensive spells without dying from overdrawing by effectively extending the casting and stamina spending over multiple rounds. This is offset by needs of physical components and long time. This allows mages with low Vigor but high Magical Training to accomplish complex magic without overchanneling to death or to create extraordinarily powerful magic by pooling together Stamina of multiple casters.
This is also the only way to create long-lasting obviously supernatural effects - by anchoring them to a physical medium, be it a runic inscription on a sword, a magic circle, a totem built from stone and bones. Once the anchoring structure is destroyed, the effect immediately lapses.

Novice spells require 10 rounds of casting, 1x Chalk, 1x Fifth Essence, 1 of each alchemical essences related to spell effect.
Journeyman spells require 10 minutes of casting, 2x Chalk, 3x Fifth Essence, 2 of each alchemical essences related to spell effect.

Master spells require 1 hour of casting, 3x Chalk, 5x Fifth Essence, 3 of each alchemical essences related to spell effects.

The mechanism of spell resolution is as usual, but the caster(s) use Ritual Casting instead of Spell Casting. On a fumble, the caster suffers from overchanneling as if they cast the spell in a single round, along with other consequences.

If multiple casters perform the same rite, they all must know the general gist of it - even if improvised, which requires 1 hour / 4 hours / a day of explanation for Novice / Journeyman / Master spell respectively. When casting together, the group decides on a leader, whose check would be used for overcoming defences, resisting dispellation and so on, other participants just need not to fumble. If someone other than the leader fumbles, they suffer from overchanneling as if they cast the spell in a single round, but any number of other participants may spread the damage among themselves. If the leader fumbles, every participant suffers from overchannel.

Clever improvisations and pre-established spells

The higher-ranked spells are capable of everything that lower-ranked can do but that doesn't mean that you necessarily need the higher-ranked spell. By studying the natural world and finding loopholes, one can achieve virtually the same effect by lesser expenditure.

For example, a scrying spell that allows one to see remote locations can be formulated as a journeyman spell that affects the air in such a way that it creates a perfect lens that rebounds the light across vast distances without losing focus. But it will require both you and the target to be in an unobstructed position - and most likely quite hard Education check to calculate the parameters, such as earth's curvature, atmospheric aberrations and any rebounds you'll need. On the other hand, any ~~idiot~~ novice with a gram of Power and access to a megascope can do the same for a fraction of the cost by using a pre-formulated spell that was refined over centuries (that utilizes some clever correspondence principles within enchanted gems or something).

The same way, true polymorphism usually requires a master spell and it lasts only for a short while, and can be dispelled or disrupted by dimeritium - as you need to handwave a lot of things when doing such a complex transformation without killing someone in the process. But if you do manage to painstakingly research every little detail of a particular animal's biology and reach an understanding that the mind is tied to the soul and not the body, you can create a lasting transformation that will last indefinitely - because in actuality it is instantaneous.
So, pre-existing spells can be cheaper, more powerful and/or have additional effects that their improvised counterparts should have any right to be because they are the result of long iterative refinement across many generations of mages.
They are also irreplaceable in combat or do-or-die scenarios - you don't have time to think about spell parameters, when you are plummeting to your death or the knife is already at your throat.

Numbers part

Base stats:

- Novice: STA 3, MT 12, +1 STA per failure point
- Journeyman: STA 9, MT 17, +2 STA per failure point
- Master: STA 24, MT 22, +3 STA per failure point
- By default every spell is instantaneous, have the range of self and affect a single target (you).
- Don't be afraid to arbitrarily increase MT DC or require additional skill checks (like Education, Monster Lore, Alchemy, Crafting, Deduction or languages) if the spell effect is overly ambitious. If something hasn't been done yet, it is probably for a good cause - make PC work for it: you can make a full character arc out of getting necessary books, tutors, places of Power, ingredients and test subjects. And maybe your player's character would be the next Alzur?

Modifiers (range):

- Self: default
- Touch: +1 STA
- Range 8m: +1 MT, +1 STA
- Range 16m: +1 MT, +2 STA
- Range 4*2^N: +1 MT, +N STA
- Range sympathetic: +3 MT, +3 STA, requires physical part of place or person. Personal connection to caster or detailed image can suffice at additional +2 MT. (Maybe limit this to sensory and teleportation effects?)

Modifiers (duration):

- Instantaneous: default
- Active: 2/4/6 STA per turn for Novice/Journeyman/Master spell respectively. Can't cast other spells, while maintaining this.
- 2d6 rounds: +1 MT, +1 STA
- 1d6 hours: +2 MT, +2 STA
- Indefinitely: +5 MT, +5 STA, requires ritual

Modifiers (targets):

- Single target: default
- Multiple targets: +2 STA per additional target, all must be within range.
- Increased radius: +1 STA per 2m of radius.

Modifiers (damage, choose one mode):

- 3d6 physical damage: default
    - +1d6 damage: +1 STA
    - Ignores armour: +2 MT, +1 STA
- 1d6 physical damage per point over target's defense, each roll counts as separate attack, no more than 10 overall: default

    - Per half of your Spell Casting instead: +2 MT, +2 STA
    - +1d6 damage: +2 STA
- These modifiers can be added to both modes:
    - Change damage type to elemental, it also inflicts related status: +1 MT, +1 STA
    - Damage is non-lethal: +1 MT
    - Damage can affect non-material entities: +2 MT, +2 STA

Examples

Vile sorceress tries to stop the heart of a political opponent

She is a politician, not a great caster - she has MT 13, SC of 11, RC of 14, Vigor of 11 and she can't cast without invocation - which would make her hella suspicious, if she tries to gesture and chant in the middle of the same room, where someone afterwards drops dead.
Instead, she organizes a distraction - her acquaintance will spar her target in a courtyard beneath her window, where she can maintain line of sight without being overly noticeable.

Her target is a healthy young man, so even during sparring she can't rely on pure coincidence - the spell will be of journeyman rank. The courtyard is about ten meters below, but it is quite large, so let's pick the range of 64 to be sure. The average human has HP of about 20, so she chooses to use 7 dice of damage (and since it is a heart-stopping spell, the damage is physical, unblocked by armour and resisted by Resist Magic).

Let's tally our records:
MT: base 12 + range 1 + ignores armour 2 = 15
STA: base 9 + range 4 + additional damage 4 + ignores armour 1 = 18

She can easily create such a spell on any roll but a fumble in a couple minutes. If the target was higher, she'd need to use her library for +2 bonus - but the research would take her some time. Now the cost is another thing: even with her Focus(3), she'll overchannel for 4 points - which is 20 points of damage and enough to kill her - not cool. She is also much more proficient at casting with rituals, rather than directly, so that's what she is going to do.

She'll use up 2x Chalk, 3x Fifth Essence, 2x Barley (representing Vitriol - the destructive essence) and 1x Wolfsbane with 1x Endrega Saliva (representing Vermilion - bodily- or vitality-related essence). After arranging things properly, she'd cast her spell, looking and gesturing at her target.
She is almost guaranteed to hit and kill him, since the average Resist Magic is 4 - exactly ten points lower than her ritual casting. But if she fumbles (with the chance of 10%, which she can't affect) - she is dead on the spot herself.

Forgetful apprentice lost his notebook once again

He has some hopes but still far from a great mage: MT of 9, SC of 8, Vigor of 5.

The search spell is a simple information-gathering one, so it is a novice rank.
It was not his first rodeo, so he sewed a couple of his hairs into the binding of the book.
He chose to make the spell continuous, so he can triangulate the location of the book easier.

MT: base 12 + sympathetic range 3 = 15
STA: base 3 + sympathetic range 3 = 6 + Active(2)

It is a challenging spell for him, and he uses his master's library for +3 at this - he knows that the spell will be useful for him in the future, so he spends a few days on this project. Still, he almost fumbles a check and rolls 2: his MT check is just 1 short of success, which means that the final cost will be 1 bigger than needed - could be worse.

He doesn't yet know the principles of ritual casting - and he won't be allowed to waste materials on a spell like this anyway - but with his staff Focus(1) he is able to cast the spell, getting slightly frozen in the process.
Turns out, the book was right in his room - and he could've created a much easier spell with range 8. Well, at least he got some experience - and isn't that what apprenticeship is about?